

Book Review: The Great Brain Suck and Other American Epiphanies

I was reading Eugene Halton's *The Great Brain Suck and Other American Epiphanies* around the same time as I was Elizabeth Farrelly's *Blubberland: The Dangers of Happiness*, and Adam Sharr's *Heidegger's Hut*. Although these works are different from one another, they share important themes; thus, comparisons were inevitable. Halton's book stood out as the more scholarly ambitious, thematically comprehensive, and semiotically interesting (e.g., epiphanic narrative, Chapter's One ignition and gear shifts). Borrowing a phrase and methodology from Kenneth Burke, Halton employs a semiotic approach, perspective by incongruity, to share his "epiphanies," tying together many examples and stories in order to make his arguments from diverse material. These data, his arguments, come from socio-historical and American cultural studies--reflections, and criticisms. In an autochthonous American fashion, and even though all fourteen chapters are different, he chases after concepts many readers should be familiar with: false consciousness (Karl Marx), alienation, and ideology (Karl Mannheim)—the triumph of the machine over flesh and LIFE. In Chapter One, Halton gives us a preview of his central preoccupation when he writes:

I wish to argue for reality, if I may use that term, of a false self as a requirement of contemporary megatechnic America. That false self created by the consumption machine is not arbitrary, but it is a rationalized projection of the system, dependent upon it, a genuine agent and apparatchik of its systems requirements (p. 26).

The ubiquity of anomie during a century of fast-paced changes is a dizzying prospect of study for any writer. Assuming that a brain suck has occurred, Halton wants to understand, in his own words, "how American culture—and indeed world culture—can regain human autonomy in the face of a seemingly irresistible automatic culture" (p. xi).

Expanding from Dwight D. Eisenhower's phrase, he explores our present socio-economic, cultural and psychological paradigm as one of living in a "postdemocratic military-industrial-academic-entertainment-sport-food-complex." To some of us, this criticism and evaluation of our present condition is neither new nor harsh (to most "progressives" with a heart and feet in the wet

mud). What is uniquely Halton's is his mastery of stitching together American popular, privileged, and multicultural perspectives (e.g., SCI-FI cinema, the work and life of American artist Wharton Esherick, Geronimo, Ota Benga) and basic—accessible to most readers—sociological erudition to create a rich and complex description of our contemporary ethos. If comparisons need to be made with the abovementioned books, *Blubberland* reads as a succession and collage of newspaper or magazine articles. *The Great Brain Suck*, instead, chapter after chapter, is serious in mapping out a dysfunctional trio of interrelated realms of existence, *eigen-mit-& umwelten*, very serious too in seeking and sharing answers by demonstrating where and when we were/are wrong and who might be the minds, still, capable of perceiving truer selves—who were the defunct minds as well. ¹

Refreshingly honest, a scholar's scholar, Halton critiques, rightly so in my view, the contribution of the academies to our new existential paradigm (political, economical, cultural, social, psychological, "spiritual,"...), his postdemocratic military-industrial-academic-entertainment-sport-food-complex. He reviews the contributions of American sociology, and specifically Chicago Sociology, while exploring the causes of the machinating (my word) of the individual, polis, and nature. At the end of Chapter Five (Life, Literature, and Sociology in Chicago) he sums up the interactions between "Porkopolis" and the emergent school (its long-lasting contributions) to its present day, as follows:

In its manifestation as Chicago, modernity rediscovered Aristotle's maxim, but diabolically inverted the meanings of political and animal. The activity of life itself was turned into a thing to be possessed. The life of the public, as *The Jungle*, *The Titan*, and the human ecology of Chicago's academic sociologists showed, was one dominated by politics, machine economics, machine bureaucracy (p. 111).

As a reader interested in making connections between Deep Ecology, "ecopsychology" (used here as a generic term not denoting any particular area or specialty), and psycho-aesthetics, I was drawn to two chapters. Chapter Four describes *The Hunter-Gatherers' World's Fair* and the human display of

¹ Another unfair comparison would be to read Sharr's *Heidegger's Hut* (a coincidence: all three authors write about architecture). An entirely different book, it tells the influence that Heidegger's hut (in the Black Forest village of Todtnauberg) had on his own writing and perspectives of the world—the place where he wrote *Being and Time*.

“primitives” such as Geronimo and the pygmy Ota Benga. Halton, in my mind, picks this very moment in time, this particular event to signify perhaps a permanent loss of minds genuinely structured by nature, authentically shaped by “the others” (non-human animals). I read this chapter as an epitaph of what once was, minds truly embedded in the rhythms of LIFE, without taking in the message that sustainability is not possible in the aftermath, soon to come, of the postdemocratic military-industrial-academic-entertainment-sport-food-complex. I sense that Halton also senses a quickening of an America of many more Porkopolises or Autopolises, an America that effectively, as part of its collective psyche, internalized the maxim of Manifest Destiny. However, there are no new horizons, no new continent to misname or “primitives” to subjugate and display as relics of nudier and dirtier times.

By far, Halton’s chapter Nine (The House on Mount Misery), a description and study of the influence of the Fairhope colony in general with his focus on the American artist Wharton Esherick, was the most satisfying for me to read. It is hopeful in the way that Halton revisits Thoreau’s influence on Esherick (as told by Halton, *On Walden Pond*, the only book he traveled with, under arm), right down to the details of building, no, sculpting his own house and eventually becoming a leading figure of the Arts and Crafts movement—influencing, collaborating, and interacting with many other American artists. I think Halton presents Esherick as an exemplar of human possibility to defy the conventions that push us in the direction of the machine. The legacy of Thoreau is lived and several times upped by Esherick’s superior skills and vision. Halton does more though. He reminds us what a “sense of place” is, or can be—how it can be realized: by what means, by what minds. He reminds us in this chapter, and this is why I think it is hopeful, that any one person can create an aesthetic space and ultimately an authentic, not sense of, but actual place, where walls, furniture, stairways, bowls, and spoons are psychologically REAL items. When the objects we utilize and the very space that surround us are hand-made, they are the psyche materialized for sure, for something MORE—essence.

The reader cannot underestimate the central role of epiphany in a book that advertises the manner of its contents with the very word. Halton does believe in epiphanies as epistemological realities contributing as muses to the very structure of the book he writes. Stylistically this is worth mentioning because it points to a dialectics (perhaps dialectics is not the right process) that the author is eager to embrace as a matter of understanding and communicating about a

complex world. More specifically to the text he writes, knowing that this is one of his approaches to presenting information that crosses many areas and epochs would help the reader assimilate most of the book's contents. In other chapters, as for example in Chapter Five, he adopts a more scholarly and linear narrative. I commend his actively wondering, in the last chapter, "How do epiphanies happen? Is it serendipity? Mere chance? Preconscious knowledge surfaced? The Poetic imagination? The breath of Zeus or Huracán? The fantastic reality of Kairos?" His answer, "Somehow it seems a little of each to me, a kind of dreaming into being in the cosmic fantasia of life." A cognitive psychologist by formation (I might as well identify my biases) I am itching to give an answer. Thus his book ends, appropriately, with a Hurricane Haiku. And what is a Haiku poem if not the essence of an epiphany?

Okay, I'll tell you what I think--a psychological epiphany. Methinks that Eugene Halton actively and passionately absorbs all types and forms of percepts, aesthetes, academic information, culture, and heartfelt emotions--LIFE basically--more so than most of us. Sponging all these marvels into one psyche is bound to beget insightful connections, none commanded. I am partial to one of his hypotheses: preconscious (and unconscious) knowledge surfaced. Throughout his book, the reader is the beneficiary of syntheses going on at many levels, disciplined into narrative by expert hands.

It would be doing a great disservice to The Trumpeter reader and to Eugene Halton himself by summarizing further, thus giving away, his complex but compact book (319 pages in the paperback version). I shall say this. It is so ingeniously conceived and eruditiously written that instead of five or seven books that merely pay lip service to our contemporary "American reality," or are exclusively journalistically idiosyncratic, one could backpack with and read only his. His epiphanies become ours if we are truly seeing.

By Jorge Conesa-Sevilla